

# Rep. James L. Oberstar

## Minnesota

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### ***SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOLS***

*“We can improve the living habits of an entire generation of schoolchildren”*

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America's children are developing a more sedentary lifestyle at an earlier age. They are watching TV more and playing outdoors less. The Centers for Disease Control reports that nearly one American child in four is overweight. Fewer than 10 percent of school children age 5 to 15 walk to school, and fewer than two percent bicycle to school.

The Safe Routes to Schools program can help change this. It promotes walking or biking to school to provide our children with fresh air and exercise. It also helps reduce fuel consumption and air pollution, and promotes safety. This program has the potential to improve the living habits of an entire generation of schoolchildren.

In 2000, I brought together the federal Departments of Transportation, Education and Health and Human Services and bicycling advocates to explore this new role for the bicycle in American society. I was inspired to do this by the successful three-year Sustainable Transportation experiment in the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, where 30 percent of all trips are made by bicycle.

With the cooperation of federal, state, municipal and local school officials, as well as parents and dedicated volunteers, we can help establish Safe Routes to Schools programs throughout this country, and help our children live healthier lives.

*--Rep. James L. Oberstar*

### ***A COORDINATED PROGRAM***

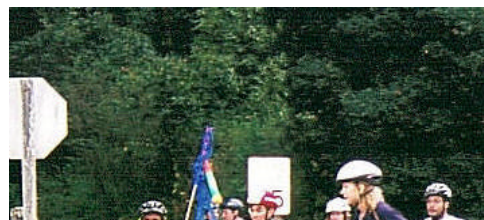
Safe Routes to Schools is a program that coordinates the efforts of federal, state and local transportation, education, health, recreation and public safety agencies to provide children with the opportunity to walk or bike to school in a safe, secure environment.

A local Safe Routes program may include designated bicycle routes with extra police or civilian safety patrols and “traffic calming” approaches during the hours children are going to and from school. In the United Kingdom they have developed concepts such as the “walking school bus,” where an adult will walk a scheduled route, gathering students along the way, just as a school bus would. However, instead of sitting on a bus, these kids are walking to school and getting the benefit of daily exercise.

The purpose of the Safe Routes to Schools program is to get children who live near their school out of their parents' cars and off the school bus and onto a bike or their own two feet.

Efforts to establish local Safe Routes programs are generally based on one or a combination of the following models:

- **Traffic Calming**
- **Funding**



“walking school bus,” where children walk to school in supervised groups and are therefore more visible to drivers, and less likely to engage in unsafe practices such as darting into traffic or crossing against the light.

### **Funding**

The availability of federal or state funds removes a major obstacle for local communities looking to start a Safe Routes to Schools program. California has funding in place for such local efforts. Other states, including Oregon, Texas, Florida and Montana are considering legislation to provide this funding.

Even if a state has no specific funding program for Safe Routes to Schools, funds can often be found that can be reprogrammed for this purpose.



**Ali Tinlin of Foxboro, Mass. created this postcard as part of WalkBoston's Safe Routes to Schools observance of Earth Day.** (Courtesy of WalkBoston)

### **Encouragement**

Encouragement campaigns use advertising and educational materials and techniques to promote walking and biking to schools. These can range from simply encouraging children to walk or bike to school, to more complex efforts such as “walking school buses” and working with local officials to increase traffic enforcement and improve infrastructure.

### **Enforcement**

The Chicago Police Department and other departments around the country use accident statistics to plan traffic enforcement strategies near schools and help provide a safer environment for students walking and biking to school. This type of program can also include efforts to educate parents and children in safe walking and biking methods.

## ***SUCCESS STORIES***

### ***Marin County, California***

In August, 2000, Marin County was awarded a special \$50,000 federal grant from the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration for four local programs in its jurisdiction. The programs incorporate traffic calming and engineering methods along with encouragement and public education to promote the program to parents, students and the community at large.

Marin County's activities include a game based on the TV show “Jeopardy” is used to teach pedestrian and biking safety. A bicycle and pedestrian obstacle course called “Safetyville” is another tool used in the community to increase student awareness of traffic hazards and to teach safety.



**Students in Marin County, Calif., learn about safety by playing a game of Jeopardy.**

### ***Arlington, Massachusetts***

In advance of setting up its own Safe Routes to Schools program in Arlington, Mass., local nonprofit agency WalkBoston surveyed students in three elementary schools to determine their method of travel to school. In the fall of 1999, one of the three schools showed only 25 to 30 percent of students walked or biked to school. By the fall of 2000, that number increased to 40 percent. When officials at that school declared October 4, 2000 “Walk Our Children to School Day,” 90 percent of the students walked or biked to school, and three classes had 100 percent participation.

WalkBoston reports that the event's success was due to several key factors: A committed principal who promoted the event to students, parents and the community; well organized parent coordinators who recruited other parents to volunteer to help with the program; the “walking school bus,” which attracted participation by students and parents; and creative and comprehensive planning by the sponsoring organization, Walk Boston. The organizers also credited good weather that day for encouraging kids and parents to be outdoors.